

DAILY INTERLAKE

Kalispell MT 59904

Daily

AUG 20 2002

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Insulation removal gearing up in Libby

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Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — A project to clean an estimated 1,000 Libby-area homes of vermiculite contamination is getting off the ground last week with the first house nearing completion and a second crew starting work on another property.

Last week, a contract crew working for the Environmental Protection Agency was finishing the cleanup of the yard surrounding a home in the Rawlings Tracts area and preparing to clean the house of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite insulation. Another crew was scheduled to begin working on a second home.

By the end of this year, five or six crews will be working, and if

all goes as planned, 50 homes will have been cleaned. By next year, up to 10 crews could be working simultaneously.

"We'll keep adding crews as we knock off the kinks in how we set up the system," said EPA on-scene coordinator Paul Peronard.

With an estimated 1,000 homes on the schedule for cleanup, the entire job is expected to take about three years.

The initial screening of more than 3,000 homes for the presence of vermiculite is nearing the halfway point. The homes are being prioritized for cleanup based on the threat of exposure to asbestos.

At the property currently being cleaned, the yard was full of vermiculite and the attic was insulated with Zonolite brand insulation. The yard was excavated and work

ers were using a vacuum truck to suck up any remaining vermiculite outdoors. Sprinklers were being used to keep dust from becoming a problem and air samples were being taken around the perimeter.

The homeowners will be given a line of credit to restore the landscaping on their own, Peronard said.

"Some folks will want us to do the replacement and we'll do that," he said.

The residents of the house are staying in a motel while the work is being done.

"We hope to set up some arrangements in the future where we'll rent some apartments," Peronard said.

"The house itself has been wrapped in plastic to prepare for the removal of the vermiculite

insulation. A large vacuum inside is being used to keep air pressure low, ensuring that any asbestos fibers stay indoors.

Workers going in and out of the house pass through an entry corridor in which they change clothes and shower.

The vacuum truck will be used to suck the insulation out of the house. Because some of the insulation had fallen down into the wall space and was leaking into the living area, some of the paneling may be removed to vacuum out that area, Peronard said.

The initial cleanups are expected to take about two weeks each, but the pace will increase as work continues.

"We hope to be able to get this down to about a week once we get the system down," Peronard said.

2032427

SDMS Document ID